The Odor of the Other: Olfactory Symbolism and Cultural Categories

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This essay looks at a variety of ways in which social categories are constructed and conveyed by olfactory codes in different cultures. The importance of olfactory symbolism in the West and elsewhere has been brought out by a number of recent works that have examined aspects of such symbolism within specific societies.[1] Nonetheless, the subject is still one that remains largely overlooked and uninvestigated by anthropologists and scholars of culture.

By exploring the ways in which olfactory symbolism is used to express themes of identity and difference in diverse cultures, including that of the West, I hope to show here the extent to which olfactory codes pervade classificatory thought, not only in "exotic," highly olfactory-conscious societies, but even in our rather "deodorized" Western society. To this end I will bring together examples of such symbolism from a wide variety of cultures. At the same time, the examination of how odors are used to categorize "others" in different societies provides an important insight or, better, "inscent," into the construction of concepts of "oneness" and "otherness," and their basic similarities and differences across cultures.

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THE ODOR OF THE OTHER

Odors and Class

The ascription of characteristic odors to different races and different social groups is a universal trait and one that has a certain empirical basis: body odors can differ from culture to culture, partly because of the different foods consumed and partly because of genetic factors (Moncrieff 1966:209). While all peoples give off odors, most people are so accustomed to their own personal and group scents as to be unaware of them, noticing only the odors of others. Edmund Carpenter, for instance, reports the following interchange from his anthropological fieldwork among the Inuit:

> One day when Kowanerk [an Inuit woman] and I were alone, she looked up from the boot she was mending to ask, without preamble, "Do we smell?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Does the odor offend you?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> She sewed in silence for a while, then said, "You smell and it's offensive to us. We wondered if we smelled and if it offended you." [Carpenter 1973:64]

The widespread role of odor as a marker of social identity and difference led one early-20th-century scientist to hypothesize that olfactory affinities and antipathies are an important means of group preservation (Corbin 1986:210).[2] Whether this is true or not, the odor of the other does in fact often serve as a scapegoat for certain antipathies toward the other.[3] This principle can be found to operate when members of one culture attribute an exaggeratedly offensive odor to members of another culture for whom they feel an animosity for unrelated reasons. In the anti-Semitic Europe of the Middle Ages, for example, it was believed by many that Jews emitted a reek so horrible that they could only rid themselves of it by Christian baptism or by drinking the blood of a Christian child (Largey and Watson 1977:1022).

Blacks have also traditionally been assigned a foul odor by mainstream Western culture, evidenced both in descriptions by early European anthropologists of the "stench" of Africans (Corbin 1986:38, 209) and in white stereotypes of "repulsive-smelling" blacks in the American South. John Dollard writes in *Caste and Class in a Southern Town:*

> Among beliefs which profess to show that Negro and white people cannot intimately participate in the same civilization is the perennial one that Negroes have

a smell extremely disagreeable to white people. . . . White people generally regard this argument as a crushing final proof of the impossibility of close association between the races. [Dollard 1937:378]

White Westerners, in turn, are often, to their surprise, perceived as foul-smelling by members of other cultures and races (Klineburg 1935:129–130; Ellis 1942[1899]:60–61).

It is evident in most such cases that the stench ascribed to the other is far less a response to an actual perception of the odor of the other than a potent metaphor for the social decay it is feared the other, often simply by virtue of being "other," will cause in the established order. On a small scale, we say that something or someone "stinks" when it disagrees with our notion of propriety; on a large scale, we apply this metaphor to whole groups of people. Therefore, while we may feel an antipathy toward something or someone because its odor offends us, we may equally ascribe an offensive odor to something because we feel an antipathy for it (or indeed the two elements may operate simultaneously so as to reinforce each other).

The use of olfactory symbolism as a means of expressing and regulating cultural identity and difference is found in a great many cultures. A particularly well elaborated example of the olfactory classification of different social groups is provided by the Tukano-speaking tribes of the Colombian Amazon.[4] According to this Amazonian culture, all members of a tribe share the same general body odor, which is said to mark the territory of the tribe in the same way that animals mark their territories through odor. This territorial odor is called *mahsá sëríri* and has the metaphorical meaning of "sympathy" or "tribal feeling" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:124–126).

The specific odor of each tribal group is considered to be caused by the different foods it customarily eats. Thus, it is said of the intermarrying Desana, Pira-Tapuya, and Tukano tribes, that the Desana, who are hunters, smell of meat, the Pira-Tapuya, associated with fishing, smell of fish, and the Tukano, associated with agriculture, smell of roots. It is held to be possible to recognize the distinct "odor trails" laid down by these different exogamic groups within the general communal territory (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:125–126). Indeed, "when travelling from one region to another [the Indians] continually sniff the air" and remark on the different territorial and tribal odors (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:125). These distinct tribal odors all have different symbolic associations that serve

to order the interaction between one tribe and another (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985a:24, 33). Odor thus functions in this Amazonian society as a marker of tribal identity and territory, and as a regulator of intertribal relations.

The establishment of social boundaries through recourse to olfactory markers can take place within communities as well as between them. It is common, for instance, for the dominant class in a society to characterize itself as pleasant-smelling, or inodorate, and the subordinate class as foul-smelling. In ancient Greece, for example, Socrates opposed the use of perfume by men on the principle that it masked the natural olfactory distinctions between freemen and slaves: "If you perfume a slave and a freeman, the difference of their birth produces none in the smell; and the scent is perceived as soon in the one as in the other" (Lindsay 1910:165).

In 19th- and early-20th-century Europe, the principal olfactory distinction was between the upper class, which lived in a clean, inodorate or fragrant environment and used light delicate scents, and the working class, which lived in a dirty, foul-smelling environment, and used heavy, coarse scents. Somerset Maugham wrote in 1927:

> In the West we are divided from our fellows by our sense of smell. . . . I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of a sensitive nostril. [1985(1927):142]

George Orwell likewise argued that the "real secret of class distinctions in the West" could be "summed up in four frightful words . . . *The lower classes smell*" (Orwell 1937:159, emphasis in original). It is odor, according to Orwell, that serves to make the class barrier impassable: "Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot" (1937:160).

The social hierarchy of smell described by Maugham and Orwell is also evidenced in the imaginative literature of the period. In *My Lady Ludlow*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, the superfine sensibility of an artistocrat is described in terms of her olfactory preferences:

> The choice of odors was what my lady piqued herself upon, saying nothing showed birth like a keen susceptibility of smell. We never named musk in her presence. . . . [H]er opinion on the subject was believed to be, that no scent derived from an animal could ever be of a sufficiently pure nature to give pleasure to any person of good family. [Gaskell 1858:18]

Indeed, even musky-scented flowers were suspect. If a suitor of one of Lady Ludlow's maids appeared wearing an offending sprig in his buttonhole, "she was afraid that he liked coarse pleasures, and I am not sure if she did not think that his preference for these coarse sweetnesses did not imply a probability that he would take to drinking" (Gaskell 1858:18).

If the olfactory delicacy of the upper class was due to the fineness of its sense of smell, the olfactory promiscuity indulged in by the working class was reputed to be the result of a dull sense of smell. As a Victorian perfumer explains:

> Among the lower orders, bad smells are little heeded; in fact, "noses have they, but they smell not"; and the result is, a continuance to live in an atmosphere laden with poisonous odours, whereas anyone with the least power of smelling retained shuns such odours, as they would anything else that is vile or pernicious. [Piesse 1891:32]

As these citations make plain, the working classes' apparent proclivity for "disreputable" odors was considered an index of its propensity for all else that was disreputable. As is also evident, these olfactory class distinctions were not thought to be based on mere social circumstances, but rather on fundamental differences in the quality of the sense of smell, itself, between the classes.

The odor of the proletarian other in 19th-century Europe was often real enough: many workers did reek of the filthy conditions in which they lived and worked (Corbin 1986:142–160). The disapprobation accorded this reek by the middle and upper classes, however, was as much a product of certain social sensibilities as of natural olfactory sensibilities. Orwell, for example, admits as much by saying that "even 'lower class' people whom you knew to be quite clean—servants, for instance—were faintly unappetising. The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours" (Orwell 1937:160).

Indeed, in previous centuries members of the European aristocracy had reeked just as much as anyone. The typical stench of the elaborate wigs affected by the 18th-century nobility, for instance, led one English writer of the time to comment that he had had "the honour of smelling in the most unsavoury mannor very many heads of the first rank" (McLaughlin 1971:113), "rank" wittily conveying here both class and reek. So closely associated were certain "foul" odors with the nobility of the day, that, according to the contemporary playwright, Sebastien Chamfort, one provincial gentleman,

on returning home from Versailles, ordered his servants to urinate around his manor so that his home would acquire the same aristocratic aroma as that famed court (Morrow 1983:76). Thus, while certain odors, such as that of urine, tend to be universally disliked, cultural norms can make these odors a matter of indifference or even of appeal. Just as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," so "fragrance is in the nose of the smeller."

With this in mind, let us turn to the rigorous olfactory class division effected by the Dassanetch of southwestern Ethiopia. The Dassanetch divide themselves into cattle-raising pastoralists and fishermen. As cattle are of preeminent practical and symbolic importance for the Dassanetch, pastoralists are regarded as greatly superior to fishermen. Each of these two social groups is identified with the odor of the species of animal it depends upon for its livelihood. The Dassanetch, in fact, believe that humans are naturally inodorate and that their odors are acquired through contact with their particular environments (Almagor 1987:115).[5]

The value accorded cattle by the Dassanetch is such that the smell of everything associated with cattle is considered good, and the pastoralists do all they can to augment their identification with this prestigious odor:

> They often wash their hands in cattle urine; men smear manure on their bodies to advertise the fertility of their herds; and nubile girls and fertile women smear *ghee* [liquid butter] on their shoulders, heads, hair and bosoms to ensure fertility. . . . The Dassanetch explicitly say that the smell of *ghee* serves to attract men and is the "perfume," so to speak, of women. [Almagor 1987:109]

While other odors, such as those of flowers, are also considered good by the Dassanetch, the odor of cattle has the added characteristic of serving as a marker of group identity for the pastoralists (Almagor 1987:110).

As pastoralists are identified with the odor of cattle in Dassanetch society, so fishermen and their families are identified with the odor of fish. Unlike cattle, however, fish are symbolically suspect: they are considered to exist outside of natural cycles of weather and sexuality, so fundamental to the well-being and procreation of cattle. Fish, and the fishermen who associate with them, are therefore said by the pastoralists to be foul-smelling.[6] The supposed acyclical nature of fish makes their odor particularly noxious, for, "unlike other bad smells, which come and go, stimulate awareness, and evaporate, the bad smell of fish is a kind of stagnation and is permanently

connected with [fishermen]" (Almagor 1987:116). This belief in the foul odor of fishermen is so strongly held by the "upper-class" pastoralists that they will hold their noses when walking by fishermen's huts. Although a certain amount of interchange takes place between the two groups, usually to the advantage of the pastoralists, the social and olfactory barriers between them are so rigidly established as to prevent any merging of identities (Almagor 1987:110, 117).

It is noteworthy that for most outsiders the smell of the Dassanetch pastoralists, perfumed with butter, manure, and cattle urine, would probably be more repellent than that of the fishermen, who apparently do not make any special effort to give themselves a piscine odor. Nonetheless, the social and olfactory codes of Dassanetch society state definitively that pastoralists are good-smelling and fishermen bad-smelling. Evidently, here again the standards of olfactory classification are being strongly influenced by cultural considerations. The odor of cattle is held to be superior to that of fish by the Dassanetch because cattle are considered superior to fish. The odor of pastoralists, who are identified with cattle and form the elite within Dassanetch society, is therefore considered good, while that of fishermen, who are identified with the inferior fish, is considered bad.

The odor of the fisherman other is classified as foul by the dominant pastoralists, not only because fish and fishermen constitute an "inferior" and "alien" group, but also—as seems to be the rule in such cases—because the pastoralists perceive them as threatening decay within their own community (Almagor 1987:111). For the pastoralists, the world of fish and fishermen, independent as it apparently is from periodic cycles, represents a world without order that can disrupt the orderly cycles on which their own bovine world depends. Thus, the pastoralists' repugnance to the odor of fish and fishermen is, above all, a repugnance to the disorder that it represents. This repugnance is heightened by the fear that disorder, like odor, has the ability to transgress boundaries. The pastoralists, for example, believe that "the bad smell of fishermen can infect the cattle" (Almagor 1987:111).

The fact that the two groups are not entirely separate but constitute one interdependent community probably only increases the pastoralists' concern to safeguard their own identity and social structure from external forces of corruption. Even within the general

order of a society, therefore, certain peoples can represent disorder from the perspective of the dominant class and, as a result, be attributed the foul smell of decay.

Another and more complex example of a society that distinguishes between its own members through a symbolic system based on odor is provided by the Suya of the Brazilian Amazon. The Suya use three principal odor classes for symbolic purposes: bland-smelling, pungent-smelling, and strong-smelling. Adult men who live in the men's house in the village plaza constitute the dominant group in Suya society, and they are classified as bland-smelling or inodorate. Old men and women are classified as pungent-smelling, boys and girls as strong-smelling, and women as very strong-smelling (Seeger 1981:106–120). Women, in fact, are referred to as "our rotten-smelling property" by Suya men (Seeger 1981:107). These odor classes stand for degrees of culture and socialization, with a bland smell signifying the highest degree of culture and a strong smell, the lowest degree. This olfactory classificatory system thus establishes men as the best exemplars of social order and women as the worst (Seeger 1981:115).

Men are said to have a bland odor, according to this system, because the male community of the men's house constitutes the ideal society in Suya culture. Women are assigned a very strong odor because they are said to distract men from their ideal social life centered in the men's house and because their fertility associates them with nature—the antithesis of society. Old women are presumably less strong-smelling because they are no longer attractive to men and no longer fertile. The reason why old men are said to be pungent-smelling is because the relaxation of cultural restrictions in old age makes old men more "natural" and less social. Children are classified as strong-smelling because they are not yet fully socialized (Seeger 1981:107–115).

Tribal leaders constitute another group within Suya society classified by odor; they are said to be very pungent- or even strong-smelling (Seeger 1981:203). If a strong smell symbolizes the antisocial, however, why should a tribal leader, the head of society, be considered strong-smelling? The Suya say that the tribal leader is less socially complete than other men because his spirit resides with some species of animal or plant (Seeger 1981:202). As in the case of women, therefore, this association with nature that is perceived as

constituting a threat to society is symbolized through odor. Another reason for the pungent odor attributed to leaders would seem to be that their unique status within an otherwise conformist society renders them anomalous, capable of disturbing the ideal of social uniformity (Seeger 1981:203). At the head of society, tribal leaders are, to some extent, outside the main body of society.

Perhaps most important, however, tribal leaders are classified as pungent-smelling because they are powerful. The Suya here apply a principle they derive from their knowledge of the animal world: the most powerful animals also have the strongest odor. Tribal leaders are, in fact, compared to jaguars, which are said to be powerful, dangerous, and odorous (Seeger 1981:202). Thus, the association between a strong odor and power, implicit in many other cultures where those groups that appear to threaten the stability of the dominant class are characterized as strong-smelling, is explicit in Suya culture. The odor of the other in these cases signifies not only the disorder of the other, but also the *power* of the other to cause disorder.

The Suya offer an instance of a society in which the odors attributed to different groups are largely symbolic. Most people, for example, would consider men to have a stronger odor than boys. For the Suya, because mildness of odor symbolizes social centrality and men are the most socially central group, the reverse holds true. The relationship of body odor to social integration in Suya culture is brought out in the male initiation rite that takes place when a boy reaches puberty. This rite, which serves to transform unsocialized boys into socialized men, is said by the Suya to reduce the strong odor of boys into the bland odor of men (Seeger 1981:119). The use of olfactory terms to indicate social status is evidently of much greater cultural importance to the Suya than any classification of natural distinctions from human body odors would be.

Women, Nature, and Foreigners

The strong odor attributed to women by the Suya is characteristic of many male-centered societies in which, from the dominant male perspective, women are the excluded and feared other. In such societies it is often women's odor of menstruation that is singled out as particularly foul-smelling. The highly olfactory-conscious and male-dominated Desana of the Amazon, for instance, consider the odor of menstrual blood the most offensive and polluting of all

odors. It is said to attract snakes and other venomous animals and to harm food crops and game animals (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:273). The Desana believe that a menstruating woman "stands quite outside of culture, and has become a receptive she-animal which exposes society to shame and pollutions" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:277). Menstruation, as a kind of "break-up of the bodily structure," would seem, by analogy, to threaten the stability of the social body. The odor of menstruation is thus the odor of anticulture, and it signals women's dangerous ability to undermine the structures of society.

In premodern Europe, menstruation and its odor were accorded similar destructive and anticultural properties: for example, the ability to render fields barren, mirrors dim, iron rusty, and dogs mad (Barret 1970[1801]:44). This antipathy to the odor of menstruation, however, while common to many cultures, is by no means universal. The Dassanetch, for instance, say that menstrual blood has no smell, or a neutral smell, and they regard it as a necessary part of the cycles of nature, like rain. Menstruation is, in fact, called "the rain of a woman." For the Dassanetch, it is postmenopausal women who are foul-smelling; such women are said to smell of fish (Almagor 1987:111). If one recalls that the odor of fish symbolizes the disorderly noncyclical world in which fish are thought to live in Dassanetch culture, then it becomes evident that the odor of fish attributed to old women refers to their similar separation from the orderly world of natural cycles. The odors ascribed to women, therefore, vary according to the different preoccupations of particular cultures.[7]

While, as a general class, women are often characterized as foul-smelling in male-dominated societies, different attitudes toward different "types" of womanhood may be expressed through a more complex system of olfactory symbolism. The threefold categorization of women as (1) sluts or prostitutes, (2) maidens, wives, or mothers, and (3) seductresses, prevalent in Western tradition, for example, has a corresponding olfactory classification.

Sluts (this term can allude to prostitutes, but refers more generally to women who are slovenly or morally lax) and prostitutes are identified with stench. The Spanish term for a whore, *puta*, in fact, is based on the Latin word for putrid, as are similar terms in other modern Latin languages. This stench is the metaphorical product

of prostitutes' and sluts' failure to regulate their bodies in accordance with cultural norms, and it signals their symbolically polluted and polluting status. The 17th-century poet John Donne thus writes that "the seely Amorous [frail lover] sucks his death/by drawing in a leprous harlots breath" (Shawcross 1967:50). In the 18th century, a French sanitary reformer noted that prostitutes disappeared along with foul odors after the drains of Florence were covered and the streets cleaned and strewn with odorous flowers (Corbin 1986:143), a manifest association between corrupt women and corrupt odors.

Maidens, wives, and mothers, as exemplars of cultural norms, tend to be identified with pleasant, nonthreatening odors; in the case of wives and mothers, the odor of food, perhaps; in that of maidens, the odor of innocuous flowers (Corbin 1986:194). The association between maidens and fragrance, in fact, is so ubiquitous as to constitute a commonplace in Western culture and, undoubtedly, has a great deal to do with the high valorization of female virginity in Christian tradition. Old maids, however, constituting a social anomaly and a threat to the reproductive power of society, are more likely to be accorded a stale or sour odor.

Seductresses resemble prostitutes in their lack of sexual morals. They differ from them in that, whereas prostitutes tend to be characterized as ugly, promiscuous, and unlovable, seductresses are beautiful, discriminating, and (while heartless themselves) heartbreakers *(femmes fatales)*. In the olfactory scheme of things, seductresses are associated with heavily sweet and spicy odors; the sweetness of the scent signifying their beauty and attraction, and the spiciness and heaviness, their exotic status and overwhelming powers of fascination. "Put on your silks; and piece by piece/Give them the scent of Amber-Greece: And for your breaths too, let them smell/ Ambrosia-like, or Nectarell" wrote Robert Herrick in the 17th century in a poem entitled "To His Mistresses" (Martin 1965:20). Cleopatra and Marie Antoinette are classic examples of the scented seductress, while modern examples are provided by perfume-vending models and film stars.

Sluts and seductresses, taken to their extremes, become witches and enchantresses in Western lore, with the disruptive powers of the former magnified into the supernatural powers of the latter. The qualities and odors attributed to the witch and the enchantress are likewise those of the prostitute and the seductress magnified. The

following quotation from a 19th-century German book on mysticism illustrates the association commonly made between the impure sexuality of the witch and her impure odor.

> [Witches] exhale a stench from the mouth, the whole body, which is communicated to their garments and fills their houses and the vicinity and infects those who approach. We can attribute this to the secretion of a malodorous animal oil, within the organism, arising from the impure ardors which consume them. [Görres 1861:180–181, quoted in Lea 1957:1505]

In the dialect of the Pyrenees, indeed, the word for witch, *poudoueros,* is derived from the Latin for putrid, just as are colloquial terms for prostitute in southern Europe (Summers 1956[1926]:44).

The enchantress, on the other hand, who is as attractive as the witch is repulsive, exhales an irresistible, bewitching perfume. One Elizabethan clergyman compares such sexual sorceresses to panthers, believed by the ancients to attract all other animals by their sweet breath:

> for as the Panthers by their sweet smels drawe the beasts unto them and then destroy them, so also do Harlots deck and adorn themselves with all alluring provocations, as it were with inchanted odors, to draw men unto them, of whom they make spoil and rapine. [Topsell 1967(1658):449]

A characteristic enchantress is depicted in *Francouneto,* a 16th-century French oral tradition recorded in the 19th century by Jacques Jasmin. In this tradition, Francouneto, reputed to be a sorceress and associated with ill-omened odorous flowers, is a "paragon of beauty," called "the siren with the heart of ice" by the young men of her village who "[adore] her as the priest adores the cross" (Jasmin 1987[1842]). In discussing this and similar legends, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie writes that the odors of flowers were commonly believed to provide a medium of sorcery during this period (Le Roy Ladurie 1987:48–49).

The association between the archetype of the enchantress and sweet, evil scents penetrates our modern consciousness through the marketing of perfumes with such names as "Black Magic" and "Poison," and through fairy tales. In the popular children's book by C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair,* for instance, the beautiful and evil Queen of the Underland attempts to keep a Prince of the Overworld captive through the use of magical scents:

> She [took out] a handful of a green powder. This she threw on the fire. It did not blaze much, but a very sweet and drowsy smell came from it. And all through the

conversation which followed, that smell grew stronger, and filled the room, and made it harder to think. [Lewis 1967:149]

The extraordinary powers of the witch and the enchantress render them dangerous to society as a whole, but particularly to men. In passages highly symbolic of male concerns over losing their cultural dominance to powerful women, one major medieval tract on sorcery, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, recounts how a man discovered that his genitals had disappeared soon after he was spurned by a young woman (evidently a witch) and how witches kept male organs imprisoned in boxes and nests (Kramer and Sprenger 1988[1486]:119, 121). The repulsiveness of the odors and other physical qualities attributed to the witch, and the attractiveness of those associated with the enchantress, suggest a simultaneous loathing and desire on the part of men to lose themselves in the feminine other.

The cultural and olfactory categories outlined above are, of course, not absolute or mutually exclusive—prostitutes can be mothers; wives, and indeed all women, can be witches. (In fact, many of the deeds witches were commonly accused of, such as rendering fields and cattle barren, were the same as those menstruating women were thought to cause.) Even sweet-smelling maidens are still, from another perspective, foul-smelling women who need to render themselves inoffensive through the use of deodorants. While these categories are not hard and fast, nor explicitly stated, they are so embedded in Western folklore as to be familiar to any Westerner. Perhaps because men do not constitute an "other" in Western tradition, this olfactory classification of women does not have a comparable male counterpart.

In the West and elsewhere, olfactory symbolism often serves to express an association between the otherness of women and the otherness of nature. The Desana, for instance, say that menstruating women are "she animals," attracting dangerous animals and spirits with their "feral" odors. In turn, certain animals are said by the Desana to resemble women; peccaries, for instance, "are compared to savage forest women, foul smelling, always foraging and grunting, and openly promiscuous" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:133). The Suya explicitly state that women are the least social of human beings because they are the closest to nature. The strong smell attributed to women by the Suya is a sign of this identification with the "otherness" of the natural world. In the West, the association of the odor

of women with that of nature is evidenced not only in the commonplace association of women with flowers, but also in allusions to the "animality" of women, particularly nonconformist women. An example of this is found in the passage cited above in which the stench of the witch is said to be due to a "malodorous animal oil" within the witch's body.

The olfactory classification of women in male-dominated societies defines women's otherness in relation to the centrality of men. Similarly, the olfactory classification of nature defines the otherness of the natural world from the perspective of the human world in many cultures. Indeed, in the West, the lore surrounding the gathering and preparation of scents often describes a mythic passage from the savagery of nature to culture.

The spices that played such a fundamental role in ancient Greek culture, for example, were reputed to be found in inaccessible locations surrounded by dangerous animals. According to tradition, the gathering of these spices was possible only through ruses of one sort or another by the human collectors. Cinnamon sticks, for instance, were believed to be found in the nests of great birds built on precipitous crags. The cinnamōn collectors were said to leave carcasses of large animals for the birds to take to their nests so that the nests would break under the weight of the carcasses and fall to the ground, whereupon the collectors would gather up the sticks of cinnamon (Detienne 1977:5–35). Spices thus enter the human world through a human defeat of nature.

In the modern West, a similar tradition regarding the gathering of musk can be found. In *The Science and Art of Perfumery*, published in 1945, we read:

> The method of killing the [musk] deer is of more than passing interest. Since the animal is fast on foot, the use of dogs would be impossible. . . . But the deer has been endowed by nature with a keen sense of melody, a love for harmony, and the hunter, taking out his flute, suddenly breaks the stillness with stirring music. The musically inclined deer comes closer to the spot from which the melody is emanating, and this proves his undoing. [Sagarin 1945:60]

As with spices in Greek mythology, musk is obtained by the defeat of the animal "other" through human cunning.

Musk, however, coming from a pseudo-anal gland of the deer, is in its pure form repulsive-smelling to most humans. In fact, it was once believed that "the odor of the musk deer's abdomen . . . killed the foolhardy hunter who failed to hold his nose before approaching

his prey" (Corbin 1986:67). Only when it is diluted does the odor of musk become tolerable. The same holds true for civet, obtained from the scent gland of the civet cat.

Why would such animal odors be used by humans? The reason lies in part in the symbolic meanings attached to such odors. The Dassanetch pastoralists anoint themselves with the odor of cattle because in their society cattle signify cultural order. In Western society we anoint ourselves with musk and civet because such odors signify natural vitality. Thus, while the strong smell associated with animals signals their "otherness," their dangerous opposition to human society, at the same time it is a sign of their participation in the power of nature, from which humans have alienated themselves. By appropriating (diluted) animal scents, humans hope to acquire some of the powers attributed to animals, particularly with regard to sexual attraction, while remaining within the structures of society.

The symbolic logic informing this appropriation of the odor of the animal other is manifested in a quotation from *The Science and Art of Perfumery:* "Seldom in the history of science is there an example of man's magical transformation of the ugly to the beautiful such as is found in the use of animal scents in perfumes" (Sagarin 1945:66). According to this logic, then, the use of animal odors in perfume involves the magical transformation of an ugly, natural object into a beautiful cultural product. As usual, no attempt is made to consider the matter from the other side, in this case, that of the animal. As an object, the other has no concerns with which one need concern oneself. Its importance lies solely in the extent to which it may affect or be used by oneself.

The olfactory classification of nature in the West resembles that of women, exhibiting a similar tripartite structure. In general, cultivated or controllable nature—fields, gardens, woods, and so forth—is thought to have a pleasant, refreshing smell. Wild nature, in contrast, tends to be associated either with stench or with strong, sweet or spicy odors. The jungle, the quintessential symbol of wild nature, for example, might be presented as reeking of animals and rot, or redolent with the scents of exotic flowers. In either case, the odors are overwhelming for "civilized" humans and dangerously conducive to "savagery." For this reason, in Victorian novels scenes

of seduction were often placed amid the concentrated scents of the exotic flowers of the hothouse (Waters 1988:270–272).

This symbolic classification of certain types of wild nature as putrid-smelling or overly sweet-smelling, which also applies to such "wild women" as prostitutes and seductresses, holds as well for foreigners, "wild humans," who can be characterized as putrid, as we have seen, or perfumed. In the West, those foreigners who were accorded the foulest odors were generally those who were deemed to be "savages" (Corbin 1986:39). Those foreigners who were characterized as perfumed tended to come from India or the Middle East, and undoubtedly this characterization has a great deal to do with the traditional provenance of spices from those regions, and the traditional placement of sweet-scented Paradise in the East.[8]

Fragrant foreigners, however, tend to be just as much an object of mistrust as foul foreigners, as their fragrance not only signifies disruptive otherness in itself, but also deceit, seductive power, and self-indulgent hedonism. This stereotype of the fragrant foreigner can be found in popular romances (for example, Beckford's *History of the Caliph Vathek* of 1786 and Moore's *Lalla Rook* of 1817), and in children's stories (e.g., C. S. Lewis's *The Horse and His Boy*, 1966).

It would seem that, in the West at least, foreigners, women, and nature, as different varieties of "otherness," tend to be typed according to a basic olfactory chart whereby the repulsive aspect of the other is conveyed through the symbolism of corrupting stench, and the seductive aspect through the symbolism of corrupting fragrance.[9] Only insofar as the other is perceived as complying with cultural norms can it be attributed a pleasant, relatively innocuous odor.

Another olfactory classification we have not yet examined in depth is that of inodorateness. While a lack of odors is generally associated with cleanliness, in certain cases it signifies barrenness and insensibility as well, as in the examples of the empty desert and the unfeeling woman. Thus, in one French tale in which flowers are transformed into women, the camellia is told, "You are beautiful, Madam, but you have none of the true perfume of beauty which is known as love" (Coats 1970:44). This symbol of inodorateness would seem to be used to some extent by women to classify men as "other," as barren and unfeeling, although this is rarely explicitly elaborated. (The other basic olfactory symbol by which men as a

class are characterized as other is, of course, the stench of the savage male animal.) In one 19th-century gardening book by and for women, for example, women are associated with the fragrant garden and men with the laboratory: inodorate, insensitive, and sterile (Chamberlain and Douglas 1892:6, 46, 67). Little wonder, then, that modern advertisements for perfume for men should play on images not only of male sensuality, but of male sensitivity.

Interestingly, the use of perfume by men, once widespread in the West, declined with the rise of the machine at the time of the industrial revolution (Kennet 1975:189). It might be that, for men to enter into the new world of the mechanical order, they had to renounce the fragrances that are metaphorically antithetical to the symbolic inodorateness of the barren, insensible machine. This metaphorical opposition between fragrance and machinery may also explain, in part, why Western modern media are so tellingly devoid of odors. In any case, machines are classified as inodorate in Western culture not only because they, in fact, tend to be made of materials that give off little odor, but because their sterility makes them *symbolically* inodorate.[10] There is nothing more absurd than a perfumed machine. The robot is neither fragrant nor foul. Its otherness is the otherness not simply of anticulture, but of antilife.

Odors and the Supernatural

Thus far we have examined some of the olfactory symbolism applied to the human other, the natural other, and the mechanical other. The one primary type of otherness that remains is the supernatural other. Although the inorganic nature typically attributed to supernatural beings would seem to argue for their being odorless, such beings are as often as not characterized by odors in the traditions concerning them. In many cases this is likely due, in part, to an association between the "airiness" attributed to spirits and the "airiness" of odors. More significantly, however, odors, along with a variety of other physical characteristics, are commonly used to signify the moral qualities attributed to supernatural beings. Thus, evil spirits are said to emit an "evil" odor in cultures the world over, while good spirits emit "good" odors.

The Bororo of Brazil, for example, classify the two basic types of spirits in their cosmology by odor. The negatively perceived spirits of transformation, the *bope,* are said to give off a strong putrid odor, while the positively perceived spirits of structure, the *aroe,* are said

to have a sweet smell (Crocker 1985:37, 160). In the West, devils are traditionally said to smell of brimstone, or sulfur, and angels and holy beings, of ravishingly sweet odors (Classen 1990b). This association of good spirits with fragrance would seem to offer one example of a case in which the strong scent accorded to the other has a primarily positive valuation. Unlike the fragrance of the enchantress, for example, which works to the smeller's harm, the fragrance of the good spirit works to the smeller's good.

The battle that takes place between good and evil forces in different religious traditions is sometimes associated with a battle between "good" and "evil" odors. Among the Shipibo-Conibo of Peru, evil spirits are said to try to pervert the beneficial power of the "good-smelling" songs sung by the shaman in the context of the healing ritual, by singing "evil-smelling" songs of gasoline, fish-poison, menstrual blood, and so on (Gebhart-Sayer 1985:171). In some cultures, spirits and odors are so closely identified as to seem one and the same. The *jinn* of the Muslim world, for instance, are popularly believed to live in dung-heaps and to harm humans by their evil odors (Westermarck 1968[1926]:280; Boddy 1989:106). The Warao of Venezuela hold that odors are independent beings: foul odors originate in the land of the dead located in the West, and fragrant odors, with the god of life in the East. Odors are said to travel in the wind and attach themselves to certain beings and places (Wilbert 1987:1141–1142). When a foul odor attaches itself to a person, the result is an illness that must be cured by administering remedial fragrant odors:

> Once it has obtained access to the body, a therapeutic innoxious and fragrant odour detaches itself from its vehicle of transmission and diffuses throughout the body region permeated by fetid air. Curing is achieved by the interaction of the two gases and the expulsion through the portholes of the body of the fetid air by the "denser" fragrant air. [Wilbert 1987:1141]

In such a culture, odors do not merely characterize others, but are *themselves* others.

The association between stench and death found among the Warao is common to many societies in which death and the dead are accorded a foul odor. The origin of death, in fact, is attributed in one way or another to a foul odor in many traditions. The Uduk of Sudan say that, originally, people resurrected from the grave. This immortality was lost when a woman, newly risen from the grave, was rejected by her neighbors because of her stench, and in

consequence, her angry mother burned down the tree connecting heaven and earth (James 1988:38–39). Likewise, in a myth of the Shipaya of Brazil, death comes into existence when humans reject a basket of rotten meat containing immortality. The Kraho of Brazil, however, say that death was originally caused by humans succumbing to the stench of aquatic spirits (Lévi-Strauss 1964:154, 177). In this last case, it is the odor of the other that causes death; in the first two cases, death is caused by the *rejection* of the odor of the other. In any case, immortality is made irrevocably "other" for humans by their antipathy to stench. The anointing of corpses, particularly mummies, with perfume in many cultures can be interpreted, in part, as an attempt to overcome mortality by transforming the foul odor of death into fragrance, otherness into oneness (Camporesi 1988).

The association of the stench of decay with the horrors of death, disease, and dissolution undoubtedly is basic to the almost universal dislike of putrid odors. The strong smell and terrifying "otherness" of the corpse might well furnish the basic model for according a foul odor to disturbing "others" of many kinds. Thus, the foul smell attributed to the spirits of the dead among the Uduk (James 1988:73) is due both to the association of such spirits with corpses and to their anticultural otherness. The Batek Negrito of peninsular Malaysia say that the sun has a foul odor because it travels through the putrid underworld of the dead at night. Symbolically, however, the foul odor of the sun is due, not so much to the sun's association with corpses, as to its negative perception among the Batek Negrito, who deem the heat of the sun to be unhealthy. Significantly, the moon, which is said to pass through the underworld during the day, but which is accorded the culturally desirable quality of coolness, is said to be fragrant (Endicott 1979:38–41).

In a variation on this theme, the Ongee of the Andaman Islands associate smell with living beings and odorlessness with the spirits of the dead. Smell, in fact, is said to be the principle of life. Spirits, who wish to regain life, constantly seek out the odors of the living and cause their deaths by absorbing all of their smells. Thus replete with odor, the spirits are reborn as living humans (Pandya 1987:19). The odor of the corpse, therefore, signifies the ebbing away of life, and it is dangerous insofar as it indicates the presence of dangerous spirits. Here the opposition of the inodorateness of the dead and the

odorousness of the living signals the mutual exclusivity of the two classes of beings. In Ongee cosmology, humans and spirits cannot coexist in the same world, for the spirits will take the odor/life of the humans and become human, and the humans, without their odor/life, will become spirits.

WHEN ONE BECOMES OTHER

In *Gulliver's Travels,* when Gulliver returns home from his voyages, he finds that he cannot abide the odor of his family. Even after having been home for five years, Gulliver can still barely tolerate the smell of other humans. He states:

> I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table. . . . Yet the smell of a [human] continuing very offensive, I always keep my nose well stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves. [Swift 1950(1726):309]

This olfactory antipathy was instilled in Gulliver during his stay in a land in which humanlike creatures, called Yahoos, manifested all the coarsest vices, and horselike creatures, called Houyhnhmns, the highest virtues. On returning home after this experience, Gulliver found that his cultural and olfactory antipodes had become inverted; he felt at odds with his own kind, and at one with horses:

> The first money I laid out [on returning] was to buy two young stone-horses, which I keep in a good stable, and next to them the groom is my greatest favorite; for I feel my spirits revived by the smell he contracts in the stable. My horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four hours every day. They are strangers to bridle or saddle; they live in great amity with me, and friendship to each other. [Swift 1950(1726):303]

For Gulliver, humans had become the threatening other, dangerous "brutes" who leave the earth "reeking with the blood of its inhabitants" (Swift 1950[1726]:308), while nature had come to represent harmony and order. The olfactory consequence of this was that the odor of humans became repulsive to Gulliver, and the odor of horses attractive.

The olfactory reversal described so strikingly in *Gulliver's Travels* can be found in actual tales of journeys in which travelers are assimilated into other cultures and other odors. One such case deals with a young white man, Manuel Cordova, who was captured by an Amazonian tribe in the early 20th century. Cordova's first olfactory

impression of his captors was that they had a strange, musky odor. In turn, the Amazonians apparently did not consider Cordova to have quite the right "odor of culture," for, as part of their rite of tribal initiation, they brushed Cordova's body with fragrant leaves and bathed him with a fragrant liquid (Lamb 1975:17).

After a period of living with the tribe, Cordova became "attuned" to its olfactory traits. Eventually, however, he began to long to return to his own people. "It was at this time," he states, "that I began to notice again the smell of these people, a strange, persistent musky odor that I began to dislike" (Lamb 1975:181). As his dissatisfaction with tribal life grew, Cordova found that the "overpowering musky smell" of the tribe "nauseated" him (Lamb 1975:186). The Indians had once more become "other" for Cordova, and he returned to the world of whites. One can imagine that, without the cultural and olfactory re-reversal that Cordova experienced before returning to his own people, he would have found himself in a similar predicament to Gulliver's on his return home.

A similar "olfactory reversal" is sometimes described as occurring after a journey to the world of the supernatural. An example of this is found in the legend of the 12th-century Dutch mystic, Christina *Mirabilis*. Christina, on resurrecting shortly after her death, found that her experience of the divine fragrance had rendered her unable to abide the odor of humans. It was only after she immersed herself in a baptismal font, and was symbolically born again, that she was once again able to tolerate the odor of humans and live among them (King 1987:150–152).

One's own odor is also often altered through association with the supernatural in the traditions of different cultures. In the West, holy persons were believed to manifest an "odor of sanctity," signaling the presence of the Holy Spirit, while the wicked manifested the stench of the Devil (Classen 1990b). Among the Warao of Venezuela, the bad breath of the sorceror indicates that he has recently returned from a journey to the foul underworld (Wilbert 1987:1142). The Ongee shaman, in contrast, rather than taking on the odor of the spirits he contacts, gives up some of his odor to them, in order to both attract the odor-hungry spirits and acquire the "lightness" necessary to travel to the spirit world (Pandya 1987:168–184).

Those persons who come into the presence of supernatural beings without undergoing the correct olfactory transformation are experienced as "other" by such beings. In a legend of the Andes, the daughter of a mountain deity falls in love with a human and tries to hide him in her home. Her parents discover the man by his foul odor, however, and he is forced to leave the supernatural abode (Condori and Gow 1982:50). In ancient Egypt, the dead king had to be perfumed with incense in order to be accepted by the gods:

> The use of [incense] in assuring the divinity of the dead king is important, for when he goes to the Horizon or the West he is most easily accepted by the gods when he is like them, and being like them means among other things that "your scent is as their scent." [Neilsen 1986:9]

For the ancient Egyptians, incense was the scent of the gods. By acquiring this scent, the king affirmed his basic identity with the gods: "My sweat is the sweat of Horus, my odour is the odour of Horus" (Neilsen 1986:9; see also Howes 1988).

One can become other not only through contact with others, but also through a change in one's social status, which often produces a corresponding change in one's olfactory status (and vice versa). In Bororo society, for instance, new parents, who constitute a particularly anomalous class, are surrounded by olfactory taboos: they are not supposed to engage in strenuous labor because the odor of their sweat would be harmful to them, and they are not supposed to engage in sexual relations because the odors of sexual fluids would be harmful to their child. New mothers are not allowed to prepare food for others, for their "stench" would be communicated through the food and harm those who ate it (Crocker 1985:59–60). In parts of southern Europe, the anomalous nature of couples who contracted what was considered a socially inappropriate marriage was traditionally signaled by incensing the couple's house with foul smoke (Roubin 1981:168–169). In such cases, olfactory symbolism is used to mark a person's separation, temporary or permanent, from cultural norms.

Significantly, individuals who feel themselves to be cut off from society can sometimes attribute a foul odor to themselves. Such persons imagine that their bodies give off putrid emanations, often as a result of an inherent fault or evil within themselves, which cause them to be socially isolated. Interestingly, this disorder is particularly found in Japan. The sufferers tend to be timid young men, who

believe that the odors they emit are so repugnant that they avoid contact with others, and constantly wash and deodorize themselves (Le Guerer 1990:33). This disorder would seem to be a literal actualization of the expression "to be in ill odor," meaning to be in a state of social disfavor. One feels that, in some intrinsic way, one is "other" within one's society, and one imagines that this "otherness" is communicated to one's fellows through a distinguishing evil odor.

OLFACTORY INTERCHANGES

It is traditional in many cultures, including the West, to believe that odors not only signal the qualities of their sources of origin, but also communicate them. The odors of disease, for instance, are widely believed to communicate disease (Corbin 1986:16–17). Involved here is the notion of odor as "essence," containing the intrinsic identity of its source of origin. In consideration of this, to protect one's integrity it is necessary to keep not only the other, but also the odor of the other at bay.

One method of warding off intrusive odors is by employing counteractive odors. In the West, this method was particularly prevalent during the olfactory onslaughts occasioned by plagues, when people employed strong scents of all kinds to ward off the contaminating odors of disease. The diarist Samuel Pepys, for instance, writes after seeing houses marked with the cross, which indicated the presence of the plague: "It put me into an ill conception of myself and my smell, so that I was forced to buy some roll-tobacco to smell and chaw—which took away the apprehension" (Latham and Matthews 1974:120). The custom in premodern Europe, and in other societies, of hanging scented plants over the door of one's dwelling no doubt served in part to protect one's home from alien olfactory influences (Roubin 1981:164). Similarly, the ancient custom of perfuming guests would serve to annul the guests' potentially dangerous odors and integrate their otherness into an olfactory oneness.

Another method of preventing olfactory and categorical transgressions is through the strict separation of conflicting categories and their odors. In certain olfactory-conscious societies, such as those of the Desana and the Batek Negrito, for example, certain kinds of foods must be cooked at different times to prevent their odors from intermixing: a confusion of categories that would represent a breakdown of cosmic order. The Batek Negrito say that foods

with different odors should not be cooked together because such foods were established as separate by the gods (Endicott 1979:76). The Desana believe that to cook animals with "male" odors together with those with "female" odors would be like committing adultery. "The mere idea causes revulsion and is emphatically rejected as unthought of and highly dangerous" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971:235). A similar symbolic logic can be seen in the Batek Negrito belief that improper contact between relatives can produce illness caused by the intermixing of their odors (Endicott 1979:77). A more universal belief in this regard, as we have seen, is that the odors of menstruating women are harmful to the rest of the community and must be contained through practices of exclusion.

Odor need not always serve as a mark of separation, however, for the transitive quality of odor, which makes it a dangerous transgressor of barriers, also renders it an apt medium for interchange and integration with others. One thinks of the olfactory exchange of the greeting, implicit in the West, explicit in many other societies. Smelling the head, for example, is a traditional form of greeting in parts of India. In the Hindu epic *Ramayana* we read, "I will smell thee on the head; that is the greatest sign of tender love" (Meyer 1930:183). Through the act of smelling, one fills oneself with the presence of the other.

To take another example, the Ongee equivalent of "How are you?" is "When/why/where is the nose to be?" (Pandya 1987:167).

> Following the basic greeting and exchange of pleasantries, the Ongees act out the following scenario. If a person says that he is heavy [overly odorous], he sits down on the lap of the person who has asked him how he is, and rubs his or her nose on the cheek of the inquirer. . . . If the response of the person is that he is light [deficient in odor], the inquirer takes that person's hand and blows on it. . . . The Ongees describe the acts of rubbing the nose . . . and blowing on the hand as doing *e/geie kwayabe,* shifting smells, from one to the other. [Pandya 1987:114–115]

Here the act of giving and receiving odor serves to establish an olfactory and social equilibrium.

Such olfactory interchanges extend into other areas of social life. For the Northern Yaka of Zaire the reciprocal interaction of procreation is expressed as "smelling one another" (Devisch 1985:596). The Desana, Pira-Tapuya, and Tukano tribes of the Amazon use olfactory symbolism to characterize their reciprocal relations. Each of these Amazonian peoples, as a rule, finds its own odor and, in particular, the odor of its women preferable to those of the other two

groups (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:273). Nonetheless, women are traditionally exchanged in marriage among the three tribes. In practical terms, this can be explained as a means of avoiding excessive inbreeding. In olfactory terms, the reason given for this practice is that marriage partners should not belong to the same odor category. This principle of olfactory complementarity is also expressed by the three tribes in their rituals of exchange, during which each tribe offers the others a class of ants with a different odor (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985a:24, 33). In such a case, achieving olfactory and social complementarity through interchange with the other, foul-smelling though it may seem, evidently takes precedence over one's preference for one's own group odor.

Odor is also used almost universally as a means of entering into dialogue with the divine other. An ancient Egyptian text states:

Your perfume comes to me, you gods;
May my perfume come to you, you gods.
May I be with you, you gods;
May you be with me, you gods.
May I live with you, you gods;
May you live with me, you gods.
I love you, you gods;
May you love me, you gods. [Nielsen 1986:9]

Likewise, a Christian poem from the 17th century describes the dialogue between the believer and God as an olfactory exchange:

For when *My Master*, which alone is sweet,
And ev'n in my unworthinesse pleasing,
Shall call and meet,
My Servant, as thee not displeasing,
That call is but the breathing of the sweet.

This breathing would with gains by sweetning me
(As sweet things traffick when they meet)
Return to thee.
And so this new commerce and sweet
should all my life empty and busie me. [Hutchinson 1941:174–175]

The odor of the divine other serves in these cases as an invitation to participate in a dynamic exchange of odors, of intrinsic essences, that expresses and forms the highest ideal of interactive harmony.

CONCLUSION

Odors are symbolically employed by many cultures to serve as identifying marks of different classes of beings. The attractive/re-

pulsive nature of olfactory experience makes odor a particularly useful symbolic vehicle for categorizing different groups according to cultural values, as it invests classificatory systems with a strong emotive power. The inhalation of a foul odor, for instance, produces the immediate physical repugnance a society might demand its members feel in response to a particular class of people. To characterize a certain group as foul-smelling, therefore, is to render it repellent at a very basic physical and emotional level, not simply at a cognitive level. Likewise, to characterize a group as fragrant is to render it attractive, although this attractiveness may be tempered by connotations of underlying danger.

The primary negative olfactory characteristics ascribed to the other in different cultures are: (a) foul, (b) dangerously fragrant, and (c) inodorate. The foul other is immediately and obviously repellent. The dangerously fragrant other is a "sweet deceiver," apparently attractive yet fundamentally destructive of one's integrity. (One can speculate that those societies prone to be suspicious of pleasure are also likely to use fragrance as a symbol of untrustworthiness.) The inodorate other, while not as obviously repugnant as the foul other, repels through its fundamental lack of "humanity": for example, the inodorate spirits of the dead among the Ongee, or the inodorate wasteland of the desert in the Western imagination.

The primary positive olfactory characterizations are (a) fragrant, and (b) neutral-smelling or inodorate. Fragrance here suggests all that is fundamentally desirable. Neutrality of odor can signify both cleanliness and purity, and also a basic centrality and constancy, removed from dangerous extremes of all sorts and immune to the vagaries of unstable outsiders. It is also true that one (and on a larger scale "one" is constituted by the dominant group, which establishes the basic cultural codes) tends to take one's own odor or status for granted, and to rank others according to their fragrance or foulness, desirability or undesirability.

Such categorizations are not always absolute, for the same group may sometimes be characterized as fragrant, and sometimes as foul. In the West, for example, a woman may be a fragrant maiden in one context, and a foul witch in another. Similarly, among the Desana, deer are sometimes seen as "clean, sleek forest maidens, sweet scented and seductive," and sometimes as "repulsive bitches in heat" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985b:128). This ambivalence of odor in-

dicates the ambivalent attitudes of the dominant group toward those others it finds attractive on one level and repellent on another.

As a rule, the dominant group in a society ascribes to itself a pleasant or neutral smell within this system of olfactory classification. What constitutes a "pleasant" (or "unpleasant") odor is by no means universally agreed upon, however. For the Dassanetch of Ethiopia, the odor of cow manure is "pleasant" and serves as the identifying olfactory mark of the dominant group. In the West, where the odor of manure is considered "unpleasant," to identify a group as smelling of manure would be to place it in a position of exclusion and inferiority. Fragrance and foulness must therefore always be understood within a specific cultural context.

In spite of such cultural divergences in the evaluation of odors, certain smells would nonetheless seem to be almost universally liked and others universally disliked. The odor of sweet-scented flowers, suggestive of freshness and bounty, for instance, is generally considered attractive by most cultures, while the odor of decay, with its implications of disease and death, is generally considered repellent. Again and again in different cultures, therefore, we find floral scents used to symbolize desirability and putrid odors, to signify undesirability. These odor values would seem to constitute something of constants in the varying symbolic olfactory charts of different cultures.

Those cultures that make extensive use of olfactory symbolism customarily apply it to the sacred order, as well as to the social and natural orders. Thus, among the Bororo, the odors that are employed to classify human, animal, and plant life are ultimately derived from the two fundamental classes of spirits: the *bope,* the foul-smelling, negatively perceived spirits of transformation; and the *aroe,* the sweet-smelling, positively perceived spirits of structure. In the premodern West, the Devil was believed to emit a foul odor, while God and his saints suffused fragrance. A group classified by odor in such a society is located not only within the cultural order, but also within the cosmological order. For example, the classification of Jews as foul in the West reinforced their association with the foul-smelling Devil. Thus, the aversion Christians felt to the supposed odor of Jews was not simply a physical or social repugnance, but a moral repugnance to the "smell of evil."

It is not only the strong emotional appeal of smell that makes odors useful for classifying others, but also the fact that it can be perceived at a distance and does not require intimate contact to be experienced. Thus, to label a group "foul," one does not need to have had any close association with it. At the same time, the ability of odors to travel through space renders them capable of crossing barriers. This transitive character of odor symbolically expresses the ability of different classes of beings to transcend class boundaries. The foul other can invade one, the fragrant other, absorb one. Odor, therefore, comes to symbolize not only the qualities of the other, but also the ability of the other to disrupt one's own order. The disintegrative power of the odor of the other can be controlled through practices of strict separation of groups with different olfactory and cultural values, or through the use of powerful opposing odors. A classic example of the latter practice is the widespread use of fragrance to ward off evil spirits.

The very ability of odor to break down barriers, which renders it so dangerous in one regard, however, also makes it a powerful force for integration. The incense employed in a religious ritual, for instance, serves not only to unite humans and gods, but also to unite the participants in the rite. With regard to this characteristic of odor, a shared smell can give the partakers a strong "we" feeling, while an interchange of personal or other odors between individuals and groups, such as takes place in many forms of greetings, can serve as a basis for the recognition and mediation of mutual differences.

Olfactory codes function in association with other sensory codes. In certain cases there is a consonance between the message conveyed through the medium of smell and that communicated through other sensory media. A seductress, in the West, for instance, is typically characterized not only by a heady scent, but also by a beautiful appearance, a soft touch, a euphonic voice, and so on—all desirable characteristics. In other cases, however, the olfactory message differs from that produced by the other sensory characteristics. A saint, for example, might be accorded an ugly appearance and a beautiful fragrance, a conjunction of an undesirable trait with a desirable one. The conflicting messages in this case can be reconciled as follows: the attractive fragrance signifies the beauty of the saint's

spirit that transcends the unattractiveness of the saint's visual appearance or material form.

The importance ascribed to olfactory markers, as opposed to other sensory signs, depends on the emphasis placed on smell by a particular culture. Every society has its own hierarchy of the senses, or sensory order (Howes 1991a), and the ranking accorded to smell within that order can vary widely from culture to culture and from period to period. Much of the olfactory symbolism we are familiar with in the West, for example, derives from an earlier period when smell was rated more highly than it is today (Classen 1990c).

Not only do societies differ with regard to the importance they accord to smell, they also differ as to the qualities they ascribe to it. For instance, in the West, perhaps because of its exclusion from the realm of the intellect, smell is particularly associated with the memory and the emotions (Almagor 1990). A popular illustration of this association, celebrated by Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* (1932–1934), is the rush of childhood memories that can be brought on by smelling an odor connected with one's childhood.

The Desana of the Amazon, in contrast, hold that smell, far from being evocative of personal memories, contributes to rendering a personal memory unnecessary. The reason for this is that odors, along with other sensory stimuli, are comprehensively encoded with social norms by the Desana and so constitute a collective store of knowledge (Classen 1990a:728–729). "It is not necessary to remember because an inspiration [sensory sign] is a presence, it is a traditional moral value. That does not need a memory. A memory is something personal" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981:95). Smell for the Desana is not idiosyncratic and irrational, as it is commonly thought of in the West, but part of an essential intellectual process whereby fundamental ideals are recognized, understood, and acted upon (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981:90–91).

In other societies it is the communicative nature of smell that is emphasized, or its association with the life force. Consequently, while smell, along with the other senses, has a number of intrinsic distinguishing characteristics, these are emphasized and elaborated differently in different cultures. The same holds true for the relations between smell and the other senses. Just as fragrance and foulness must always be considered within a specific cultural context, so must the role of smell.

The "odor of the other" thus becomes not simply the odor *attributed* to others, but the ways in which odor is understood and employed by others. There is a great deal to be learned from an exploration of the role of smell in different cultures. For example, Walter Ong and others (Ong 1967:6; Howes 1991b:182–185) have suggested that the sensory order of a society is revelatory of its social and cultural order. Do societies that emphasize smell tend to display any concomitant cultural traits, such as a preference for content over form, spirituality over materialism, synthesis over analysis? The absence of a definite vocabulary of odors in the languages of the West has long been puzzled over by scholars of olfaction (Harper, Bate-Smith, and Land 1968). Are there more precise odor vocabularies in other, more nose-minded, cultures, or is it in the nature of smell to elude linguistic definition?

In order to answer these and other questions, one must first set aside the olfactory biases of one's own culture and endeavor to perceive the world from the "point of smell" of the other. The penetrating power and emotional impact of odors, along with the fundamental association between smell, breath, and life, make the "world scent" thus arrived at a potentially much more vital concern than the detached "world view" that we in the West commonly limit ourselves to when considering the world of the other.

NOTES

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[1]Notably Corbin (1986), Pandya (1987), Almagor (1987, 1990), Howes (1987, 1988), and others cited within this essay.

[2]Howes and Lalonde suggest in their essay on the "history of sensibilities" that the symbolic importance of smell and/or taste—the discriminating senses—tends to increase when social boundaries are perceived as being threatened (1991).

[3]An anecdote concerning Queen Elizabeth I provides an amusing illustration of this. The Queen, who was reputed to be "very delicate in her olfactory nerves," responded to a petitioner whose suit she did not wish to grant by remarking on the foul odor of his boots. The petitioner, grasping her meaning, replied: "Tut, madam! It is my suit that stinks, not my boots" (Strickland 1851:709).

[4]I examine the symbolic importance of the proximity senses of smell and taste in different Amazonian societies in "Sweet Colors, Fragrant Songs: Sensory Models of the Andes and the Amazon" (Classen 1990a).

[5]The Dassanetch also characterize other peoples in the region by different odors (Almagor 1987:110).

[6]Whether the fishermen consider *themselves* to be foul-smelling is an unanswered question. The same question can be asked of the working class in the 19th century and many other censured groups that have been characterized as foul-smelling throughout history. The "other" is assigned an odor, but not usually allowed a voice.

[7]The association between menstrual odor and hunting-related menstrual taboos in various cultures is discussed in *Blood Magic* (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:21–23).

[8]The ancient Greeks, for example, believed that everything that came from Arabia, the land of spices, was sweet-smelling (Detienne 1977:10).

[9]In fact, these two categories of putrid-smelling and sweet-smelling, while antithetical in one sense, in another sense are but variations on a theme, as the odor of decomposition can smell sweetish (inducing some early perfumers to mix excrement with their perfumes [Corbin 1986:16, 67]). Thus, the "sweet-smelling" woman is but a whiff away from the "rotten-smelling" woman, as is the fragrant foreigner from the foul foreigner.

[10]The exception to this is the stench of machine oil and sweat often associated with factories (Corbin 1986:148–149).

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